

## OUR BOYS IN BLUE

Their Lot Cannot Be Said to Be a Happy One.

## DUTY ON THE FRONTIER

Fearnot at Washington Sadly Demoralizes the Army--A Complaint Preferred by Officers and Men.

"I do not see why any boy or young man with any ambition for the future should enlist in either the army or navy in time of peace," said a distinguished officer at the war department to-day.

"It seems to me that no career could be chosen with less prospect of reward for diligence, intelligence, and capability. Of course I could not say these things publicly, for we have had enough time keeping our ranks full now, and I ought not to discourage enlistments. As a matter of fact, however, our regular army is composed mainly of foreigners, many of them not naturalized."

"Why is the service distasteful?"

"Let me give you an example of my own experience. My company is stationed at an isolated post away out on the Upper Mississippi, where it is likely to remain for many years, unless called out by some emergency. There is a monotonous monotony in the life we lead which is relieved but once a year when the government supplies are sent to us. I used to wonder why country people would stand out on their front door steps, or in their front yards, to look at railroad trains pass by; but I understand it now. I appreciate the loneliness and monotony of farm life even better than folks on the farms. The passing railroad trains, although they all look very much alike, tend to relieve the monotony of gazing into the same family faces all the year round, and talking to the same neighbors from day to day. But the farmer is not lonely compared with the soldiers on frontier post. I have seen the day, many a time, when the passing of a freight train or a cattle train, once a week, would have furnished new gossip for us and relieved the terrible sameness of camp life. We would have traveled twenty or thirty miles, willingly, just to see a train rush by. You cannot understand what homesickness is until you have lived such a life for six months or more. But when you think of living that way for a year, or two years, or up to twenty years you can possibly have a better idea of how dreadful and unhappy a life it is."

"Twenty years is an exaggeration, isn't it?"

"No, it is not. Gen. Crook spent twenty years in the service without obtaining a single leave of absence. Of course that is an exceptional case. I never heard of any other officer who served that long without leave; but I mention twenty years as the time limit. A man may serve on frontier posts and lead the most depressing sort of existence from six months to twenty years, and yet he is expected to be happy all the time because he is serving his country. I tell you there is no fun in it."

My friend's conversation was so unusual and so interesting that I pressed him to tell me more of army life.

"Of course an officer can get leave of absence," he continued, "but he is not entitled to it. I know of officers who have married in haste to repeat at leisure; married solely to have some companionship on the frontier, married, only to find afterwards that there was incompatibility between husband and wife. Then the poor girl was doomed to a terrible life, more miserable, because there are very few women at the army posts, and their stock of gossip soon runs out. Even when husband and wife are well matched the life a woman leads is one of almost dismal misery; for woman is particularly a social creature, and at

times she is bereft of society, except in a most limited sense. More than half the time I keep my wife east among her gilded friends. I prefer to suffer the loneliness of camp life by myself to having her suffer it also, all the time. Moreover, when she returns to spend a few months with me, she is full of renewed life and gaiety, and it does me good to hear her chatter and tell of the good times she has had; fearing, for instance, with fellow-soldiers to tell her her lovers before I married her."

"How long is your company likely to remain at that post?"

"I shall forever, and meant it. The war department has forgotten that we are there. It is a lone company post, and one of the least desirable in the country. You probably do not realize what a lone company post is. Well, it means that there are only three officers there, and they are their own sole entertainers. Could you imagine anything more likely to drive men to solitude or sadness, than to compel three men to live together without other associates year in and year out? There is nothing new under the sun. There are no new stories, no new anecdotes of personal adventure, no new deeds of daring done by either of the three. Our individual histories are minutely known by each other, inside of two months. Then there is nothing to say but 'good morning' or 'good evening,' for there is nothing to talk about. I am here in Washington for three weeks on detached duty, and you may well believe that I am happy while this duty lasts. But when I think of returning to that post I understand

something of the feelings which possess the minds of the unfortunate folks who don't. By the way, you have undoubtedly read of a great number of desertions from the ranks of the army. And you have heard the cause of such desertions attributed, of course, to the cruelty of army officers. That is not true. The men desert because they cannot endure the solitary life which they lead. There is nothing of a highly patriotic character to hold the men. There is no war, no prospect of war, not even an indication of Indian troubles, and the common soldiers reason and argue to themselves that it is no disgrace to desert.

"Of course, you know that the common soldiers in time of peace are not the best educated men in the land, and they reason in a small intellectual circle, reaching conclusions which you and I know to be wrong. They conclude that there is nothing in the army for them, no prospect of promotion, no likelihood of actual field service; they conclude that if they had known beforehand what soldiering is, they would not have enlisted; next, they reach the conclusion that it is no harm and no disgrace to desert in time of peace, and away they go. Of course,



MONOTONY OF CAMP LIFE.

If we ever catch them, which is seldom, they are severely punished; but I always feel sorry for them, even when sitting on, court-martial and condemning them."

"How about the morals of the men?"

"They soon reach the point where they have no moral sense at all. There is a great deal of drinking done, both by officers and men. In fact, you will rarely see an officer of the army on a frontier post who does not bear upon his countenance the marks of more or less deep dissipation. It is unfortunate, but it is true. I know that the same condition prevails aboard ship, where the officers and common sailors have as monotonous a time as we have at the post, save that they occasionally run into port and get 'liberty' to go ashore. When men are confined, without society of interest, they unfortunately fall into the habit of drinking, and that usually leads to habitual drinking. The private soldiers and the common sailors, are saved by their poverty. They cannot afford to drink as much as they would like to. But they are intensely profane, and obscenity increases with their terms of service. They become a very common, low sort of creatures, kept in place and under subjection by rigid discipline and the consciousness of the power of the government over them."

"These are hard things to say of our soldiers."

"Very true, they are hard things to say of them; and they must seem especially harsh to you, coming as they do from an officer of the army, concerning his own men. But I am telling you the truth as seen from the standpoint of one on the inside. I am not maligning my men, nor traducing the soldiers of other regiments, but answering your questions candidly. I want to add that if there was any prospect of war with any foreign country, these same soldiers would stand by their colors and fight as long as they had any blood or breath in them. They are demoralized by the monotony of camp life. It would cost the general government some money for transportation, but it would improve the army, if there were annual reunions of regiments, or of battalions. Moreover, after such reunions, when the companies are returned to their posts, they should be changed. Furthermore, and this is a serious matter, the army is sadly handicapped and demoralized by favoritism in Washington. There are colonels here, on detached duty at the war department, who have not been with their regiments for a long time. I could name some majors and captains who have never seen their companies or battalions. They have been dancing around the national capital for many years, enjoying themselves like lords and princes, while other men, and some of them vastly better men, are obliged to lead the demoralizing life. It is a shame and an outrage. It is a disgrace to the entire army."

In speaking of this matter, my army friend became very warm and earnest. He mentioned the names of some officers of both the army and navy who have long lived in Washington, while their less influential brother officers are unable to get here on a visit more than once in a life time.

S. D. FRY.

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